

The Clipper Visits Debbie Brooks

By MYRNA WALSH



"My father told me not to play games," said Debbie Brooks, the Duxbury schools' new athletic director.

The games her father meant were the games people play on, not with, one another -- the Mickey Mouse intrigues. He encouraged her to excel in the clean, clear competition of the playing field.

And Brooks has that hallmark look of a trained athlete -- that direct, attentive composure that comes from years of watching the ball, or puck, and the moves of the other players. While she isn't one of the sleek, hard athletes, she moves with a powerful grace.

This direct, outspoken woman has developed a special relationship with her students during the 19 years she has taught physical education in Duxbury.

"Kids come into my office and fool around. There's a different relationship they have with the physical education teacher than with an academic teacher," she said. Most children are timid about her initially -- "It's my presence. I'm big with a big booming voice. The impression I give isn't me." But they soon feel comfortable because she is both honest and accessible. During this interview which lasted longer than either participant expected, coaches,

pionship teams. "Duxbury is a sports orientated town. I'm in my 19th year here and it always has been." She doesn't believe that academics suffer as a result of a strong sports program. "People probably feel that way because sports are the most visible. It gets good press. But sports affects not only the school but the whole town."

She spoke about the benefits of a strong athletic program beyond the gleaming trophies. Being proficient at a sport "makes the opportunities the kids couldn't afford with the cost of colleges skyrocketing. A big part of coaching is writing recommendations to assist kids to get into schools."

Perhaps even more important than the opportunities created by participation in sports is the growth within the student. "Being a member of anything brings kids out," she said describing a shy, friendless girl whom she helped finetune into a superb field hockey player. "Now she is full of the devil. A totally different person. It gives kids a sense of identity. If that something is successful, so much the better."

Sitting in her office which was almost cluttered with the trophies Duxbury players had earned, she talked about the sports version of the chicken-egg question -- does a coach make the team or do the youngsters create the great coach? Brooks believed that championship teams are crafted through the skill, knowledge and devotion of the coach. "To develop a championship program, you need an awful lot of dedication from the coaches. To instill in the kids the desire to be the best. You don't do it overnight. Can't walk in this year and be a champion next year, unless you come in on the tails of someone else and that won't last. Kids have to know you care about the program and its success. Can't be half-hearted."

As the coach of a field hockey team that had been undefeated in 3 years, Brooks said, "The longer you're a winner the easier it is. They (the students) come to you with the attitude to be part of a winning team. But you have to live up to it and work harder."

Over the years her team has developed a tradition of little sisters. She has coached 5 or 6 girls whose older sisters also played that sport. In the town known nationally for its skill with the soccerball, Brooks has a friendly rivalry with Pat Shea, the coach for the girls' soccer team. "We laugh about it but we don't recruit." Students can play only one interscholastic sport each season. Over the years Brooks has inspired other women to coach. Donna Marshall, one of her former students, is the field hockey coach at Boston College and Diane McNab

with him. Later on when I was working, the roles reversed and I would take him." Although she learned "knitting and all that stuff" from her grandmother, it is clear that the competitive games her father introduced taught her the skills she would use as an adult.

It wasn't until she started physical education in the 7th grade and was taught by a "tiny little lady who was good at what she did and made me like it" that Brooks committed herself to physical education. Brooks became a physical education teacher with the same determination she played sandlot softball or would later coach her field hockey girls. Beyond the academic subjects, she took physical education classes and activities with a good helping of science. Spending almost twice as long at Bridgewater State College each day as other students, she began the habit of giving her time to youngsters.

This gutsy, competitive woman is surprisingly sentimental about "my children" -- the youngsters she teaches and coaches. Her father would have been proud.

students and administrators continually popped into her office and she treated them equally.

As athletic director she is responsible for a \$119,000 budget with 35 coaches teaching 20 sports in the high school. In the middle school she oversees 6 coaches in 5 sports. "I am responsible for the entire athletic program and everything that happens," she said. She hires coaches, plans the budget, arranges the details of home games from police details to scorekeepers. She works closely with the grounds crew and decides who will use which field or gym when.

Some of the coaches she supervises also applied as athletic director when the position was open. But her relationship with them still is cordial. "I know most of them for years. We've been around." Although she has worked as athletic director only with the fall coaches, she said, she was "very pleased. They are extremely cooperative."

She and the coaches have devised a coaches' handbook which will be used as a permanent record of all athletic activities. Working with the athletic council, made up of coaches, parents and students, she encourages the participation of the town in the program.

Asked what she would like to do if money were available, she said, "I would redo the entire complex (playing fields). It is stripped right down to dirt. Some of the fields are getting to the point of being unsafe."

She would also like to start girls volleyball and golf teams. Currently a girl golfs with the boys' team. Brooks also believed that lacrosse will become popular in the town based on the interest shown in her physical education classes.

Because youngsters interest is often a mirror of the sports they see on TV, Brooks mused that Kurt Thomas would do for boys gymnastics what Olga Korbett did for the girls.

Brooks is obviously worried about 2½. "It will make my job more difficult, if I have a job (as athletic director). I don't know if there will be an athletic director next year."

As director she will have to reconcile a possibly reduced budget with the town's expectation of cham-

teaching physical education at Wareham High School. As a coach she fought for years to get equal pay for both women and men coaches. Because of her efforts many more opportunities now exist for women athletes locally. However, Brooks is opposed to mixed teams. "Our softball team ended up playing teams with boys. The smallest boy was 185-pounds -- sliding into a 115-pound girl on first base! I hate it. It's stupid. Because of their sheer size boys will dominate."

"The boys are so much more skilled because of their body structure. When they play ball, the ability difference is striking. Girls are pushed into the background. They say to me 'I don't want to play. I'm scared.' And I don't blame them." So on occasions she plans separate activities for the boys and girls in her classes. "I'm protecting my girls."

Surprisingly, the athletic director opposes certain organized sport programs. "I do not want youth programs. I grew up on a farm. We didn't need an adult standing there with a whistle. After supper the whole neighborhood came over to play softball in the field next to our house. It worries me that kids can't organize themselves. Because since they were 6 someone tells them you will play from 9 am to 11."

She complained about "untrained and uneducated" people coaching children in certain programs. "I'm not implying that all programs aren't good. But I've been spouting this for years. It all boils down to too much too soon. It breaks my heart to see 10-year-old kids getting award jackets and trophies."

"It's being medically proved that kids are not physically ready for the stress and strains. Severe damage can be done. Junior high school may be too soon -- who knows?"

"Field hockey isn't played until the 7th grade. The girls come to it fresh, new. No one is teaching them bad habits before then."

Along with the administration, Brooks made the decision to end the 8th grade football program. Although financial costs were the primary reason for the cut, Brooks suggested that the psychological and physical costs of the program were also weighed.

"Let kids be kids," she said. "Every once in a while I tell the kids in physical education -- today is yours. They have a miserable time. They argue, scream and waste half the time trying to organize themselves."

At times, youth programs become group babysitters. Parents drop off their children and pick them up sometime after the game is over.

Brooks said, "There's no sense of family anymore. You don't have people living their whole lives in Duxbury anymore. My strong sense of family is why I am what I am."

Probably the most influential person in her life was her father, about whom she spoke reverentially. "I get my confidence and leadership from my father. I have the fondest memories of going to Fenway Park